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Policy issues

Implementation of decisions adopted by the governing body at previous sessions

Governing Council decision 27/3 on international water quality guidelines for ecosystems

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

At its twenty-seventh session, held in February 2013, the Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum of the United Nations Environment Programme recognized the need for international water quality guidelines which could be voluntarily used by Governments to maintain and improve the status of ecosystems to sustain the services they provide, as a possible basis for managing water pollution and water quality, as they affect ecosystems, and to support decision-making.

Accordingly, in its decision 27/3, the Governing Council requested the Executive Director, in partnership with Governments and other stakeholders, to develop international water quality guidelines for ecosystems, taking into account existing information; encouraged Governments, scientific institutions, United Nations agencies and other relevant organizations to participate actively in developing the water quality guidelines; invited Governments and others to technically and financially support the process for the development of international water quality guidelines; and requested the Executive Director to report to the United Nations Environment Assembly on the implementation of decision 27/3.

The present report provides detailed information on the implementation of Governing Council decision 27/3.

* UNEP/EA.1/1.

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I. Overview

A. Develop international water quality guidelines for ecosystems, taking into account existing information (operative paragraph 1 of decision 27/3)

1. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) secured the services of the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security to undertake the initial in-depth scientific research required for the development of international water quality guidelines for ecosystems and to compile an initial draft of the guidelines. The Institute established a drafting team, drawing scientific input and assistance from the Global Water System Project (GWSP) network of scientists and entities such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Water Education (IHE). The drafting team undertook an extensive review of the literature and an analysis of existing information in order to inform the formulation of the conceptual approach. Possible parameters and indicators were presented for consideration and discussion in various forums.

2. UNEP, within the framework of UN-Water, the United Nations system-wide mechanism for achieving coherence and coordination in the water-related activities of the relevant agencies and programmes of the United Nations system, is rolling out two complementary initiatives contributing to the development of the guidelines as follows:

(a) Existing innovative water quality guidelines at the global, regional, national and catchment area levels are being collected, analysed and compiled into a global compendium on water quality guidelines with the support of the International Water Association (IWA) and inputs from Governments and various other stakeholders. The compendium will inform the development of the guidelines, providing information on existing guidelines, including on the methodological approaches, parameters, indicators and thresholds adopted and in use.

(b) The second world water quality assessment report is being compiled with the support of the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research, based on databases such as the UNEP Global Environment Monitoring System/Water Programme (GEMS/Water), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Aquastat database, and input from Governments, regional institutions and other stakeholders. The assessment will present the state of water quality globally, highlighting policy options for protecting or restoring water quality so that water systems continue providing services such as food production and water supply to society. The assessment will provide information on parameters, indicators and possible threshold values for consideration in the development of the guidelines.

3. UNEP has recently completed a report which has the potential to further contribute to the development of the guidelines. The report, *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) for Water and Wetlands*, was produced by TEEB – a UNEP initiative – in partnership with the Institute for European Environmental Policy and sets out important challenges for water quality accounting, such as the lack of a standard and harmonized methodology (making comparison at the local, national or international levels difficult), coupled with a lack of appropriate and sufficient data or indicators. The report concludes that in many cases the value of wetlands remains invisible to decision makers, contributing to their continued degradation. Wetlands play a critical role in the water cycle and are therefore of fundamental importance for water quality management.

4. Interim deliverables from the above-mentioned initiatives were presented for peer review at a number of key regional and international meetings, including the GWSP conference on "Water in the Anthropocene: challenges for science and governance" (Bonn, Germany, 21–24 May 2013); Stockholm World Water Week 2013 (Stockholm, 1–6 September 2013); the Budapest Water Summit (Budapest, 8–11 October 2013); and the third IWA Development Congress and Exhibition (Nairobi, 14–17 October 2013). Participants in these meetings provided extensive input for and recommendations on developing the guidelines.

5. The Committee of Permanent Representatives to UNEP was briefed on the progress made in the development of the guidelines on 26 November 2013. As a result of the recommendations received, the secretariat was requested to carry out further work on the conceptual approach to the guidelines, to clarify their scope and the process for their development, including funding, and to consider strengthening the involvement of UN-Water, UNESCO-IHE and the secretariat of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat (Ramsar Convention). The Committee took note of the terms of reference for the development of the guidelines and the process being undertaken by the secretariat to establish an advisory group to provide

information, data and experiences essential for drafting the guidelines and to review draft versions of the guidelines and advise the secretariat during their development.

6. The first interim progress report on the development of the guidelines was prepared on the basis of the initial research and analysis and taking into account the inputs and recommendations provided in various consultative forums. It proposes a conceptual approach, indicators and parameters that may be used by member States to develop specific standards relevant to their respective geographic and social conditions taking into account local knowledge. The report includes an annotated table of contents for the preliminary draft guidelines. In this phase of development, the proposed guidelines will focus on surface water ecosystems and their interlinkages with groundwater and coastal zones and will be developed in more detail in subsequent phases. The first interim progress report on developing the guidelines is being circulated to Governments and key stakeholders, including the UNEP-DHI Centre for Water and Environment, the multilateral environmental agreements and United Nations entities, for their comments and, together with such further input, is intended to serve as the basis for the continued development of the guidelines.

B. Governments, scientific institutions, United Nations agencies and other relevant organizations to participate actively in developing the water quality guidelines for ecosystems (operative paragraph 2 of decision 27/3)

7. UNEP is establishing an advisory group, whose membership will comprise policymakers and technical experts of high standing, to provide guidance and advice to the secretariat in the development of the guidelines. Over 30 Governments had responded positively to the invitation by the secretariat to nominate candidates for the advisory group by the deadline of 31 January 2014. The advisory group will be invited to review and provide comments on the first interim progress report on the development of the guidelines and its outputs.

8. UNEP is strengthening its collaboration with other United Nations entities, relevant multilateral environmental agreements and organizations. A memorandum of understanding between UNEP and UNESCO is being finalized which explicitly highlights their collaboration on the development of the guidelines. Collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) has been strengthened with the recent UN-Water decision that WHO will co-chair the UN-Water task force on wastewater management together with UNEP and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). The Ramsar Convention secretariat has been invited to contribute to the development of the guidelines and to comment on the first interim progress report. Technical experts from many institutions from developing and developed countries and United Nations entities, including UNESCO-IHE, are involved in the drafting team providing support to the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security in its analytical work.

9. UNEP is using its position as chair of the UN-Water thematic priority area on water quality, to keep UN-Water members informed of progress in developing the guidelines and to seek their input and engagement. The private sector and other stakeholders are kept informed and involved through the engagement of professional network organizations like IWA and the presentation of interim deliverables in various forums.

10. The development of the web-based platform known as "UNEP Live" has progressed significantly since the adoption of decision 27/3 in February 2013. It provides a unique opportunity for streamlining data management and access and will be a crucial platform for member States and other stakeholders to share information on the environment, including water quality. It is intended to be an important source of existing information in the development of the guidelines.

C. Governments and others to technically and financially support the process for the development of international water quality guidelines for ecosystems (operative paragraph 3 of decision 27/3)

11. UNEP has engaged Governments and agencies in bilateral discussions, through letters and email communication, to solicit information on existing guidelines for ecosystems and other water uses and water quality data in their water systems, for use in the compilation of a global compendium on water quality guidelines and the second world water quality assessment report respectively. The responses in that regard have been encouraging.

12. Requests have been sent to Governments and agencies to solicit financial support for the development of the guidelines, especially for the regional and global consultation processes to be held in 2015. Follow-up discussions are ongoing with a number of Governments and interested partners.

D. Report to the United Nations Environment Assembly on the implementation of decision 27/3 (operative paragraph 4 of decision 27/3)

13. The draft guidelines are expected to be produced by December 2014 and they will then be subjected to extensive regional and international consideration and consultation processes in 2015. The final draft international water quality guidelines for ecosystems are envisaged to be ready for submission to the United Nations Environment Assembly at its second session.

14. All interim deliverables, including the first interim progress report on the development of the guidelines, are available from the UNEP website (http://www.unep.org/esm/WaterEcosystems.aspx). Further information, including on upcoming activities, will be made available on the website.

II. Achievements

15. The achievements in the activities to develop the guidelines to date include strengthened recognition and understanding of the need for such guidelines at the international level as demonstrated by the nomination of policy and technical experts to contribute to the development of the guidelines by over 50 Governments from both developing and developed countries, and the establishment of key partnerships with United Nations entities and other individuals and entities from developing and developed countries (water associations, universities, renowned experts, etc.) to support the process.

16. In addition, the first interim progress report summarizes the findings of the extensive review of the literature; the proposed broadly peer-reviewed conceptual framework for the guidelines includes a clear development process; and significant progress has been made with regard to defining the outline of the guidelines.